

Six Reasons Why the Price of Scholarly Information Will Fall in Cyberspace

by
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In mid October Reed Elsevier and Wolters Kluwer, two of the largest commercial publishers of academic journals announced they would merge. To many observers this was yet another sign of the growing concentration of monopoly power in the distribution of scientific and scholarly information, another indication of higher prices to come.

Like many commercial publishers Elsevier is beginning to deliver its products over the web. At the company's web site you can find its mission: "Elsevier Science intends to be the preferred global scientific information provider" (Elsevier web site at <http://www.elsevier.nl>). This mission has a menacing ring to me and many other librarians who have been forced to accept annual double-digit price increases for as long as we can remember. We have an understandable fear that the relationships that have existed in the print world between universities and commercial publishers will continue as academic publication moves onto the web. There may be technological change, but the underlying economic relationship will remain – we pay what the publishers demand.

While complacency would be foolish, I believe there are six reasons why the attempts of commercial publishers to maintain existing pricing structures will ultimately fail as scholarly publishing moves into the realm of cyberspace.

One: The article will become unbundled from the journal. The leverage publishers use against libraries when establishing prices is based on the prestige of a journal title. "Good" titles cannot be canceled without risking the wrath of faculty. When articles become unbundled from journals this leverage is lost.

How will this happen? As publishers create electronic publications they will market them as collections rather than as individual titles. Site licenses negotiated on the basis of the university's population will be the norm as it now is for indexes and other collections of full-text materials. Publishers will also offer article-by-article purchases. This is inevitable, as it will allow publishers to fully tap the market by extending it to individuals and to smaller institutions. When this happens, it will be easy to see, based on usage, which arrangement – a site license or article-by-article purchases – is cheaper. Libraries will respond by adjusting their contracts.

While publishers will try to price individual articles as high as the market will bear, there are common sense limits what can be charged. At the outside, an article can't cost too much more than a 250-page textbook. Once the article is unbundled from the journal institutions can pay for the actual articles used not the prestige of titles. Some libraries are already doing this by using document suppliers who FAX paper copies. In the electronic world this trend will accelerate and commercial publishers will be forced to compete in a market with very different dynamics than the one they currently face. They will need to restructure their products and prices will be constrained.

Two: Scholarly societies will do the right thing. One of the core purposes of most scholarly societies is to support and encourage the distribution of scholarly knowledge in their field. Most societies have at least one journal and many have dozens. In the web environment the free and easy distribution of scholarly knowledge by societies becomes possible. All they have to do is put the journal on their web site and let the world have at it. There are some costs associated with this, and there is a threat to the revenue generated by print products, but if the society takes seriously its mission of informing its membership and supporting its members in communicating the knowledge they produce, it will support this activity. This will become one of the most important things the society can do for its membership. Societies that freely distributed electronic "journals" or databases of reviewed articles will be more attractive and will in turn draw more members. Subsidizing these activities with member dues will become acceptable if not demanded.

Societies without entrenched publishing bureaucracies and those that are not dependent on revenue from print publications to support other organizational activities, will find developing these services easier. But over time, those societies who fail to freely distribute information important to their memberships will find that small splinter groups will undertake this activity outside of the organization's structure.

Three: Academic Libraries will help by funding the free distribution of scholarly information. Academic libraries, which can clearly see the advantage of supporting alternative distribution mechanisms for scholarly information, will provide support for these ventures. This support will take a variety of forms from space on web servers and technical support to joint ventures and outright cash subsidy. The best example of this to date is the collaboration of the library and the university press at Johns Hopkins that led to Project Muse.

While there are many demands on library budgets it only takes reallocating a small percentage of a multi-million dollar materials budget to generate the funds required to support meaningful projects. One of the nice things about web publishing is that the cost of entry is small, so limited investments can make a real difference.

Four: I am better off publishing in a journal people can afford to read. The prestige of the journals you publish in is of course a central concern as you pursue promotion and tenure. But what happens when all of the "good" journals are so expensive that no one can afford to read them, or insist that if you put the material on the web they won't touch it, even though they have a two-year publication backlog.

What happens, in other words, when the narrow pursuit of a high status publication leads to the situation where the circulation of your ideas is constrained. At some point you will decide that it is better to have your work freely available than it is to have it in a "good" publication that is unavailable to most of our colleagues. This path is not without risk, but cases can be made, even to promotion and tenure committees, that widely cited material

distributed in less restrictive forums, especially when use can be measured, have more scholarly value than work that is locked up.

Five: Promotion and tenure systems will change. Most observers think this is impossible, but they are wrong. The current system of measuring scholarly quality uses the number of articles and perceived prestige of journals as a proxy for scholarly merit. As provosts begin to see the cost that they are paying to publishers to rate their faculty for them, and that these cost are inflating library budgets at unacceptable rates, at least some will explore alternatives. At a minimum they will be supportive of alternative methods of measuring and justifying scholarly merit.

One of the nice things about web sites is that they log use. If the full version of a tenure candidate's dissertation was downloaded several hundred times in the last five years and was in the top 5% of the dissertations downloaded in her field or the top 10% of all dissertations downloaded nationally, what does this say about the quality of her work? How many articles in prestigious journals is this worth?

Six: Everyone will get his or her cut. This is the ace in the hole. If the prices for journals continue to escalate at current rates, with surcharges for electronic access, at some point Universities will start to ask, "Why, if this information is worth so much, aren't we getting a piece of the action?" A case can be made that faculty publications are no different from patents and should be treated in the same manner, especially if there are dollars at stake. At the very least, the university should get some credit or a price break for the effort their employees are providing to support publishers. Free use on campus of the intellectual property produced on that campus seems minimum requirement.

If this doesn't happen, I can imagine what an energetic state legislator might say when it becomes clear that his state is paying millions of dollars to publishers to purchase articles some of which were produced at the state's universities at taxpayers expense.

None of this needs to happen. But I am confident it will happen because we can imagine it, and because we have the tools at hand to accomplish it. What is required is that we all work in small ways to create a free and open electronic scholarly commons – a place in cyberspace where scholarship is easily and easily available. Very few of us have any significant financial interest in the scholarship we produce, but we all have both selfish and altruistic reasons for wanting what we produce widely distributed and freely available. It brings us personal recognition as well as making the world a better place to live.

If we in the academe do not take back control of scientific and scholarly information and create the scholarly commons, then we have only ourselves to blame. We have an obligation to make the fruits of our research and study freely available to the society that supports us. If we fail to take advantage of the tools offered to us by the new technology, we will deserve the intervention of legislatures, and others, who will insist we meet this obligation.